

Hard Times – Poland and North Korea in the First Half of the 1960s

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Since the establishment of official Polish-North Korean relations in October 1948 until late 1961, relations between both states were close and warm. During the Korean War, Poland (together with other countries from the Eastern Bloc) provided aid, received orphans, and after the signing of the armistice, engaged in the reconstruction of North Korea¹. Moreover, it sent its representatives to the Neutral Nation Repatriation Commission and the Neutral Nation Supervisory Commission, where Poles did not maintain neutrality and acted in favor of the DPRK².

The first half of 1961 did not foreshadow the eventual deterioration of mutual relations. North Korea received an 11.25 million rubles loan to purchase equipment for 10 industrial objects, Poland sent a group of specialists in order to draw plans for the construction of several objects, and a new ship possessed by the Polish Ocean Lines was named “Phenian” (Pyongyang)³.

22nd Congress of the CPSU and Its Consequences

Many things had changed after the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, held in October 1961. During the event, Nikita Khrushchev repeated his criticism of Stalin’s crimes and the cult of individuals, expressed for the first time in February 1956 at the 20th Congress, in his so-called “Secret Speech”. Moreover, Stalin’s remains were removed from Lenin’s tomb, which symbolically showed that the USSR under Khrushchev was going to conduct different policy than the former dictator. The Soviet leader also underlined the commitment of the socialist camp to peaceful coexistence with capitalism, and condemned leaders of the Albanian Labor Party for not accepting principles formulated during the 20th Congress⁴.

Right after the Congress, North Korean authorities did not inform its society about the most controversial events which had taken place in October 1961 in

¹ S. Szyc, *The relations between Poland and North Korean in 1948-1961*, “Progress. Journal of Young Researchers” 2017, vol. 2, pp. 123-130.

² M. Hańderek, *PRL na strażypokoju w Korei*, „Biuletyn IPN” 2018, vol. 10, pp. 136-140.

³ Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereafter: AMSZ), Department II, 49/64, w. 3, Raport Polityczny Ambasady Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej w Koreańskiej Republice Ludowo-Demokratycznej za okres od dnia 26 IV 1961 roku do dnia 20 XI 1961 roku, Pyongyang, 20 XI 1961 r.

⁴ L. M. Lüthi, *Chiny – ZSRR. Zimna wojna w świecie komunistycznym*, Warszawa 2011, pp. 212-213.

Moscow. Kim Il Sung forbade party members to discuss Stalinism and the Albanian issue. Moreover, he was afraid that the Soviets would attack his rule, the same way they did in regard to the Albanian Enver Hoxha regime⁵. Taking this into account, it is understandable that the DPRK authorities became angry when the Polish Embassy in Pyongyang included in its Korean-language bulletin a resolution passed in December 1961 by the Polish United Workers Party. The resolution supported decisions made during the 22nd Congress and shortly repeated them⁶. After publication, a representative of North Korean Foreign Ministry instructed Polish diplomats that controversial problems should not be mentioned in the embassy's bulletins, especially because this was information that authorities did not want to be circulated among the society.

A few months after the Congress, the DPRK initiated dispute over "revisionism". The North Korean press started to publish quotations from Lenin, which according to the Soviets, had been carefully selected in order to point out that the USSR was conducting a revisionist policy. However, North Korean officials did not want to admit that this was a real reason of publishing those quotations and claimed that their goal was to teach busy and hard-working people about the classics of Marxism-Leninism⁷. What is more, in late 1962, North Korean authorities ensured Soviet ambassador Vasily Moskovski that they avoided discussion over different opinions inside the communist camp because they did not want to negatively affect the morale of the Korean People's Army. The Soviet envoy was told that DPRK officials wanted their troops to believe in a united front of communist states, ready to support their fight in case of war⁸.

After the Congress, North Korea made several other moves that resulted in the gradual decline of relations with the Soviet Union and its European satellites, including Poland. Because Kim Il Sung was afraid that the wave of De-Stalinization could undermine his position, he limited contacts between North Korea and that group of states, as well as between their citizens. The number of exchanged delegations significantly decreased, North Korea forced its students to leave "revisionist" countries, and limited the freedom of moves for foreign diplomats, as well as for Polish and Czechoslovak delegates working in the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission. Foreigners from states subordinated to Moscow were under constant surveillance while staying on Korean soil.

Poles noticed signs of this new course in the first half of 1962. In that

⁵ B. Szalontai, „*You Have No Political Line of Your Own*”. *Kim Il Sung and the Soviets, 1953-1964*, [in:] *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 14/15, Winter 2003-Spring 2004, p. 97.

⁶ *IX Plenum KC PZPR 21-22 listopada 1961 r.*, Warszawa 1961, pp. 162-165.

⁷ AMSZ, Departament II, 10/66, w. 3, Notatka z rozmów przeprowadzonych 4 kwietnia br. Na przyjęciu z okazji święta narodowego Węgierskiej Republiki Ludowej, Pyongyang, 7 IV 1962 r.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Notatka z rozmów z Ambasadorem ZSRR W. Moskowskim, Pyongyang, XI 1962 r.

period, only economic cooperation was developed what was mainly a consequence of the above mentioned loan given by Poland. At the same time, political and cultural collaboration was meaningfully limited. In May 1962, North Koreans informed Poles that the DPRK did not plan people-to-people exchanges in fields of culture and science during the whole year. That statement explained the behavior of DPRK officials who, in previous months, refused to answer Polish invitations for participation in conferences and festivals held in Poland. Under pressure from the Polish Embassy, they gave answers when it was too late to send North Korean delegates⁹.

Since 1962, foreigners who visited North Korea faced a nationalistic approach towards them. In late 1962, the Polish Embassy reported discrimination against European women who had married Korean citizens and lived in the DPRK. Those women, while in public places, encountered rude behavior like a refusal of service in shops or accosting on the streets¹⁰. What is more, DPRK authorities launched a campaign in an effort to destroy such relationships. According to the Polish Embassy, in the early 1960s, there were six mixed Polish-Korean marriages living in North Korea, and in the late summer of 1963, all couples were separated as a result of DPRK policy. In the aftermath of such ruthless treatment, one woman tried to commit suicide. Another one asked the Polish Embassy in Moscow for asylum for her husband who had fled to the USSR in order to reunite with his wife and child¹¹.

The scale of tragedy touching Polish citizens in that regard was quite small when compared to the Soviet's case. Until mid-1963, 70 Soviet women who were forcibly separated from their Korean husbands, left the DPRK. Furthermore, 6 women, together with their spouses, moved from Pyongyang to the countryside, and another 37 lived in the North Korean capital in complete isolation hoping for their husbands return¹².

Another consequence of mistrust was the return of North Korean students from Poland in 1962. DPRK authorities wanted to avoid resistance and informed students that they would go for a short trip to North Korea, and would come back soon. That is why students did not take the majority of their belongings and left Poland without saying goodbye to their friends, partners, and professors. They were completely shocked when they realized that it was a one-way journey. After coming

⁹ *Ibid.*, Raport Polityczny Ambasady Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej w Koreańskiej Republice Ludowo-Demokratycznej za okres od dnia 20 XI 1961 do dnia 22 V 1962 r., Pyongyang, 22 V 1962 r.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Raport Polityczny Ambasady Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej w Koreańskiej Republice Ludowo-Demokratycznej za okres do dnia 22 V 1962 do dnia 5 XII 1962 r.

¹¹ AMSZ, Department II, 32/66, w. 1, Notatka dot. ograniczeń stosowanych przez władze KRDL wobec cudzoziemców, Warszawa 7 VI 1963 r.; *Ibidem*, Notatka dot: udzielenia prawa pobytu w Polsce koreańskiemu mężowi obywatelski polskiej, Warszawa, 10 IX 1963 r;

¹² *Ibid.*, Raport polityczny Ambasady Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej w Koreańskiej Republice Ludowo-Demokratycznej za okres od dnia 5 grudzień 1962 r. do dnia 13 czerwca 1963 r.,Pyongyang, 17 VI 1963.

to the DPRK, students from Poland, similarly to those from other “revisionist” countries, had to deal with numerous problems. Right after arrival, they were obliged to participate in a two-month ideological training, and only after that could they see their families for a couple of days. Later, in spite of their education and qualifications, students were sent to work in the countryside. Some of them were forced to do physical work, which was a kind of punishment. Furthermore, former students were under constant surveillance and authorities forbade them to contact the Polish Embassy as well as sending letters to Poland. Four of them broke the prohibition and asked a Polish specialist working in the DPRK to take their letters to Poland. They all wrote about the hard conditions of living in North Korea, about their strong attachment to Poland, and dreams to come back there¹³.

In 1963, North Korean ties with the Soviet camp became even worse. In December 1962, a North Korean delegation visited the USSR and asked for military aid. Envoys did not achieve their goal, so after this, DPRK-USSR relations declined again and were at their lowest point in years 1963-1964. A theory circulated among diplomats working in Pyongyang that the Chinese had pushed Koreans to present wishes unacceptable for Soviets in order to weaken USSR-DPRK links, in favor of a China-North Korea alliance¹⁴.

Simultaneously, Polish-North Korean ties also worsened. In 1963, the Polish Embassy regularly informed Warsaw about negative tendencies in mutual contacts and compared it with past years. For Polish diplomats, one of the most important annual events was a celebration of the National Day of Poland’s Revival (22nd of July). Every year, the embassy together with North Koreans co-organized events commemorating that date. Different than in previous years, the anniversary in 1963 was celebrated in a very formal way. During meetings with employees of industrial complexes that had been constructed by Polish engineers and specialists, diplomats could not give a speech. North Korean authorities were afraid that Poles could have discussed controversial problems that would influence the people in unwanted ways.

What is more, during a reception in the Polish Embassy, the North Korean deputy prime minister, during his toast speech, expressed a hope that North Korea and Poland would together fight against “imperialism” and “revisionism”. Guests from other countries were surprised and these words were received with meaningful silence. The First Secretary of the Embassy outlined that the atmosphere of the reception was cool. However, he added that according to diplomatic corps resided in Pyongyang, the climate of the whole commemoration was better than in cases of similar anniversaries celebrated by other diplomatic missions representing states subordinated to Moscow¹⁵.

¹³*Ibid.*, Notatka uzupełnienie notatki z 23 grudnia w sprawie b. studentów koreańskich w Polsce, Warszawa 2 I 1963 r.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, Notatka z rozmowy z Radcą Ambasady ZSRR tow. Pimionowem, Pyongyang, 1 III 1963 r.; B. Szalontai, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, Notatka dot. obchodów 19 rocznicy Odrodzenia Polski w KRLD, Pyongyang, 25 VII 1963 r.

Regardless of limited contacts and distrust towards Poland, the embassy got the impression that to some extent North Korean authorities treated Poles better than representatives of other European countries dependent on the Soviet Union, with the exception of Romania which became a leading North Korean partner from the above-mentioned group of states. This feeling among Polish diplomats was a result of repeated Korean remarks that there had never been conflicts between both states and the expression of gratitude for constant support for main DPRK goals on an international stage. The behavior of North Korean officials rose a question of the purpose of the described approach. The First Secretary of the Polish Embassy, Jan Witek, supposed that Koreans did not want to cut off all ties with leading European communist countries. Another explanation he considered said that they might have wanted to divide the pro-Soviet Bloc¹⁶.

Distrust Towards the NNSC

In the described time, the working and living conditions worsened for Polish members of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) who, since summer 1953, were stationed in the northern part of the Demilitarized Zone. Until summer 1956, the commission consisted of Polish, Czechoslovak, Swedish, and Swiss delegates who could monitor the situation in 10 ports of entry (five in DPRK and five in ROK, respectively), as well as in spots where violations of the armistice had been reported. The NNSC's inspection teams did it in order to prevent reinforcement of the Peninsula. In the late spring of 1956, after withdrawal of the inspection teams, firstly from South Korea and soon from North Korea, the commission's impact on the situation at the Peninsula was significantly reduced¹⁷. However, Polish delegates stayed in DPRK until early 1995.

After the 22nd Congress of the CPSU, Poles faced many difficulties. Their freedom of movement was eminently limited. They were told that walking further than 300 meters from the camp without the assistance of the guards were prohibited; Koreans explained that restrictions were necessary to save delegates from stepping on mines. Poles perceived this explanation as absurd because they moved only on beaten paths and roads. Moreover, since February 1962 members of the NNSC could go on a trip or hunting only in the Kaesong district, but no one told them where the district borders ended.

Another restriction concerned traveling to Pyongyang. If they visited the capital, they were obliged to stay in a military hotel surrounded by guards. In previous

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Notatka chargé d'affaires PRL w Phenianie J. Witka z wypowiedzi min. Pak Son-Czola na coctailu 17 bm. Z okazji 15 rocznicy nawiązania stosunków dyplomatycznych między PRL i KRLD, Phenian 21 X 1963 r.; *Ibidem*, Notatka dotyczy stanowiska KPP w sporze ideologicznym, Pyongyang, 16 XII 1963 r.

¹⁷ Cho Sung-hun, *Roles and Meaning of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC)*, [in:] "Role of the NNSC shaping the security architecture at the Korean Peninsula after signing of the Armistice Agreement, Seoul 2013, pp. 5-11.

years, members of the commission had had accommodation in a hotel dedicated to foreign guests. New limitations were supported by the ridiculous argument that in ordinary hotels they could meet South Korean spies¹⁸.

Poles realized that when they were outside their homes, Korean servants were searching their rooms and all of their belongings. On other occasions, servants eavesdropped on their conversations and reported about them to Korean military personnel. Another sign of a new approach towards Poles was the DPRK authorities' efforts to limit contacts between Polish delegates and ordinary Koreans. Poles reported about an incident in Kaesong, when at the stadium, a group of orphans who had spent several years in Poland wanted to greet the Polish officers, but they all were forcibly removed by the guards in front of thousands of viewers. Another time, when a youngster who had studied in Poland wanted to talk at the street of Pyongyang with a Polish officer, a Korean guard brutally pushed the Pole and blocked their conversation.

The Korean security apparatus could not prevent all contact with ordinary Koreans so the police punished people who, in its opinion, were too close with Poles. For instance, a woman working at the post office was dismissed and forced to do physical work because she had received chocolate from Polish members of the NNSC. Another example may be a case of two Korean women that spoke with a Polish attaché at the street of the capital city, and after that was put under house arrest¹⁹.

Poles were displeased by North Korean moves, especially when they did not respect the ranks of Polish officers. One situation was especially offensive. An incident took place when the chief of the Polish delegation, Gen. Mróz, during a walk with his wife, collected flowers and put them into his general's hat. They were observed from one kilometer away by Korean guards who, after several minutes, ran close to the couple and without asking for permission, one of them looked inside the general's hat. It was a telling example of disrespect towards high-rank officer²⁰.

In spite of distrust and putting Polish members of the NNSC under surveillance, DPRK authorities expected close cooperation from the Polish side. Koreans especially paid attention to their service when in the early 1960s, Poles were invited to visit Seoul. DPRK officials wanted Polish officers to gather as much information as possible and share it with Koreans. In late 1962, they specified that they were interested not only in the location of South Korean military units, but also in the personal data of people who guided Poles and the photographs taken during such trips. Poles promised to meet those expectations²¹.

¹⁸ Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance (AIPN), 01227/109, Raport dot. naszych stosunków z sztabem koreańskim, Panmunjom, 10 II 1962, pp. 29-31 (pdf).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Raport. Sytuacja pracowników Misji w Korei, Warszawa, II 1962, pp. 26-28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 01227/109, Raport dot. stosunku Sztabu Koreańskiego do Misji Polskiej, Panmunjom, 21 V 1962, p. 32.

²¹ AMSZ, Department II, 10/66, w. 3, Notatka z rozmowy z Ministrem Spraw Zagranicznych Pak SonCzholem dnia 18 listopada br., Pyongyang, XII 1962 r.

Turning Point

The signals of North Korean intention to improve relations with the Soviet Union and its satellites, came right after the overthrowing of Nikita Khrushchev on October 14, 1964. The decision about his dismissal was announced on covers of North Korean press titles, and in Pyongyang, information came several times through public loudspeakers. Kim Il Sung sent a telegram to congratulate Leonid Brezhnev on becoming the new First Secretary of the CPSU, and expressed hope that friendship and solidarity between both states and nations would be strengthened. The last day of October 1964, he received the Soviet Ambassador and in a friendly conversation stressed that the DPRK wished to improve bilateral relations and asked if North Korea could send a delegation to participate in the celebration of the anniversary of the October Revolution in the Soviet capital. A positive answer came from Moscow the same day²².

Almost one year after these events, the DPRK ambassador in Poland admitted that Khrushchev and his politics was the biggest obstacle to advance relations with the Eastern Bloc. According to DPRK diplomat, a major mistake of former First Secretary of the CPSU, was that he interfered in internal affairs of communist parties in other countries and a lack of will to fight against the "American imperialism"²³.

From the North Korean point of view, the fall of Khrushchev took place right on time. Only a few months before it happened, in late August 1964, the DPRK openly attacked the CPSU for "revisionism" and blamed its 20th Congress for causing a conflict inside the communist camp. Ten days later, the North Korean press publicly accused the Soviet Union of forcing the DPRK to sell to the USSR its minerals for prices lower than world prices. It was a new situation because till that time, North Koreans criticized "revisionism" without pointing out the Soviet Union as a source of division inside the communist bloc.

What is more, during the previous year, no political delegation from the Soviet Bloc visited North Korea and exchange between delegations in the field of culture was at a level of 10% of what it used to be compared with years before the 22nd Congress of the CPSU. The Polish Embassy in Pyongyang concluded that DPRK relations with the USSR and its satellites reached the lowest point in history and that further deterioration could harm North Korean political and economic interests²⁴.

Poles were assured about Korean will to develop mutual relations right after the Khrushchev collapse. Ambassador Władysław Napieraj was received by Kim Il Sung on October 16, 1964, and their conversation lasted over one hour. The North Korean leader expressed an opinion that the Polish-DPRK relations were good and

²² AMSZ, Department II, 26/67, w. 2, Notatka o nowych zjawiskach w KRLD po zmianach personalnych w ZSRR, Pyongyang, 30 X 1964 r.

²³ AMSZ, Department II, 48/68, w. 5, Pilna notatka, 25 IX 1965 r.

²⁴ AMSZ, Department II, 26/67, w. 2, Raport polityczny Ambasady PRL w Phenianie za okres od 1 stycznia 1964 r. do 15 września 1964 r. Pyongyang, 1 X 1964 r.

expressed gratitude for Polish help during the reconstruction of the country after the Korean War. He also said that both states had never criticized each other and that the DPRK wished to improve relations²⁵. It could have been only a ritual exchange of courtesies, but following events proved that Kim Il Sung communicated a real intention.

In November 1964, DPRK officials presented to the Polish Ambassador an idea of founding a Polish-North Korean shipping company. Moreover, in the following months, cultural cooperation was intensified little by little, and in the field of economy both states expected that by 1966, volume of trade exchange would grow 27%²⁶.

In spite of announced intentions to develop mutual relations, visible since late 1964, in February 1965 Korean press published a controversial article which caused Polish authorities to regard the DPRK's official declaration with suspicion. The piece quoted several sentences from British and Belgian press, in which the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, Władysław Gomułka, was called a "revisionist" and "mercenary of capitalists". Additionally, the Rapacki Plan was presented as an initiative in favor of Americans and a continuation of cooperation with the West, initiated by Khrushchev²⁷.

However, the following months proved that North Korean authorities really wanted to intensify contacts with the Soviet Union and its satellites, including Poland. One of the major factors pushing them in that direction was an escalation of conflict in Vietnam in 1965. In new political realities, good relations with old partners seemed to be more important than ideological differences. Moreover, DPRK authorities wanted to rebuild ties with the Soviet Union because the USSR signed a defense treaty with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and provided financial and military aid to it. On the contrary, the closest North Korean ally in the early 1960s, Mao Zedong, decided that his troops would not participate in a Vietnam war if the United States did not enter a Chinese territory. Mao did not want to copy a scenario from the Korean War, because he was preparing a new revolution, inaugurated in 1966, the Cultural Revolution. In that regard, it appeared that in case of war on the Korean Peninsula, the Soviet Union potentially could offer bigger help than China. Furthermore, the quality of military equipment which the Soviets provided to their allies was better than those received in the early 1960s by Koreans from the PRC. North Korean efforts resulted in receiving a free military aid from the USSR in 1965²⁸. It is worth mentioning, that a value of this aid was

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Notatka z wizyty protokolarnej u premiera KRL-D Kim Ir Sena w dniu 16 X 1964 r., Pyongyang, 17 X 1964 r.

²⁶ AMSZ, Department II, 48/68, w. 5, Raport Polityczny Ambasady PRL w Phenianie za okres 15 IX 1964 – 30 III 1965 r.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Notatka, Warszawa, 10 III 1965 r.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Notatka Ambasadora PRL Władysława Napieraja, 12 VI 1965 r.; F. Dikotter, *Revolucja Kulturalna. Historianarodu 1962-1976*, Wołowiec 2018, pp. 73-75; M. Lerner, „*Mostly*

50% more than what North Korea asked from Khrushchev in 1962²⁹. It was a visible sign that the Soviets really wanted to have North Koreans on their side in a time of deepening conflict with the PRC.

In 1965, another important event took place that was perceived by North Korean elites as potentially dangerous. In June of that year, South Korea and Japan established diplomatic ties and DPRK officials were afraid that another step could be a foundation of the anti-communist alliance in the Far East. From the DPRK authorities' point of view, together with the Vietnam war and economic reforms implemented in South Korea by Gen. Park Chung-hee, normalization of relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea created an unstable international environment. That is why North Korea consequently revised its previous politics towards the USSR, Poland, and other Soviet satellites. In this regard, the year 1965 can be seen as the first year since 1961 when relations between Poland and North Korea were rather good than full of distrust and distance. Consequently, it definitely ended the worst period in bilateral contacts since its establishment in 1948 and during the whole Cold War.

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²⁹ S. Radchenko, *The Soviet Union and the North Korean Seizure of the USS Pueblo: Evidence from Russian Archive*, "Cold War International History Project", Working Paper 47, 2005, p. 9.

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